

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
January 28, 2007

“TRUST STEADILY, HOPE UNSWERVINGLY, LOVE EXTRAVAGANTLY”

*~We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long until the weather clears and the sun shines bright. We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us...but for right now, until that completeness, we have 3 things to do...
~ I Corinthians 13: 11-13*

Trust steadily in God. Hope unswervingly. Love extravagantly. And the best of the 3 is love.

Without a doubt this sounds quite familiar to many of us. We heard it earlier as Bob read Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13 and the more contemporary translation of these few verses is from *The Message* by Dr. Eugene Peterson, Emeritus Professor at Regent College in Vancouver, BC.

I'll be honest, when I discovered this was one of the appointed lectionary texts for today, I hesitated. Not because I have a problem with it, but because I've struggled with the fact that it has become more commonly romanticized, trotted out in at least half of the 150 weddings or so I've officiated here in Memorial Church. And on some levels, it stands on its own – what more needs to be said, what other insights could add to its frankness? But more importantly, I hesitated, as I thought about the daily tragedies around the world and on this campus fearing that I would sound Pollyannaish, suffering from blind optimism.

On the other hand, to reflect and preach on this passage outside the celebration of a wedding is a welcome change. It is also an opportunity to reclaim it so to speak. And it might bring us closer to the original purpose of the text. What I mean by that is though the message is readily applicable to marital love, Paul, the presumed author, is referring to love within the community – and in this case specifically Christian believers. In the preceding verses to chapter 13 he describes the body of Christ and its individual members with varying gifts and attributes - and follows that with a crescendo of sorts by suggesting that in order to live as such a body, a community - the practice of love, albeit radical love - rises unequivocally above all other spiritual gifts. It is the grounding, the foundation that enables all other spiritual gifts to flourish.

Well, how dare Paul. I mean really. Trudging along on the treadmill this week plugged into my racy little red I-pod nano, I was listening to Howard Jones lament in his pop song *What is Love?* and wondered if Paul could answer that question with any ease or certainty. Now if you are distracted at all by the fact that a clergywoman has a red I-pod nano, please come back. Your attention please.

Let's imagine for a moment that this infamous Corinthians letter has the characteristics of a hymn, and falls into 3 stanzas. In the first few verses love is

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contrasted with other spiritual gifts, noting that it is love that truly matters. (If I speak with human eloquence and the tongues of angels, but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate.) Us preachers love that one. In the next stanza of verses love is revealed for what it is NOT, affirming that love is that which endures. (Love is not boastful or arrogant or rude; it does not insist on its own way; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing. It bears all things, believes all things, endures all things – it keeps going.) And in the final stanza, love persists even when other spiritual gifts come to an end. (Love never dies; inspired speech will be over some day, understanding will reach its limit; what we say about God is always incomplete.) Essentially, through all of these stanzas, these verses, Paul focuses on what love does and what love does not do, not just on what love *is*. It is a description of love with actual results in mind. It is an exhortation, an invitation to a new way of living – and a counter cultural one at that.

For those of us who hear these words today in Corinthians – and countless times before – we can hear them and smile with sentimental satisfaction. But in all honesty, we really haven't heard. Because let me be frank – humanly we might act this way briefly or on occasion, but it is not within our power to act like this on a regular, consistent basis. When I hear these words read at a wedding, today, or any other time, rather than tritely accepting it on the surface, I might consider begging of God for such qualities that I or anyone by nature cannot have. It has been suggested that what Paul really attempted to do for this community (and now for us) is draw a distinction between human capacity and the transcendent power of the love that God gives.

One preacher has suggested that if we are not shaken by this text on some level and persist in hearing it as only human wisdom, even wisdom of the very best kind, we are probably keeping the words at a safe distance because they are just too much for us. To hear this passage is to throw oneself on the mercy of God. It is not a story about nice relationships and human successes. It is not a description of typical married life or relationships. It is not a snapshot of religious or church life either. And I'm most sorry to say that at this point and time in our history that is the understatement of the year.

What we can say is that this letter to the community at Corinth is perhaps essentially about God, about Jesus himself. It is also extraordinarily prophetic and does not let us off the hook.

Today happens to mark the midpoint of what we call the Epiphany season, (this being the 4th Sunday after the Epiphany) a season in which we celebrate the revelation, the manifestation (epiphania) of God. Primarily, we celebrate how Jesus is made known – revealed to us as God chosen one. But there is something else revealed too. We are revealed to. You, me, the lot of us. Not only could we plunk ourselves in the middle of the community in Corinth, a spiritual community in need of some heavy duty teaching on how to live and love together, but we can also locate ourselves in today's gospel of Luke – the congregation at

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Nazareth to whom Jesus gave his first sermon. Jesus is in his hometown and goes so far as to extend the good news, the love of God beyond those borders, to the Gentiles. And the anger of the crowd became so great they seek to destroy Jesus – the prophet in his own hometown – by throwing him off a cliff. Why? He was clear about the fact that the love of God, the good news extended to a wider and wider circle, not just them. The word of a prophet is not always welcome. It speaks against the dominant culture – bringing either a word of judgment against the status quo or a word of hope to counter a culture in despair.

In the center of this rejection story, we might find ourselves – people who like to know who is in and who is out, who is welcome and who is not. How far does love really go? Isn't God only on our side? God has a certain nationality, political party, religious adherence, income level. It's an odd testament to our human condition: when groups, once on the outside, come to a place of inclusion and power, they are often revealed as just as eager to exclude others.

We could go even further to say that it's about God yet again trying to reveal an obvious but not always obvious truth: loving is not about knowing. Our history shows us that it was the religious literati who found their justification in the death of Jesus; later it showed itself as the heresies of Pelagianism and Gnosticism (we can do it by correct effort or correct knowledge); the medieval church became masterful at mystification of the clear teaching of Jesus; the Enlightenment told us "I think therefore I am"; and even the Reformation was much more over theology than praxis (practice). Now we seek salvation by interaction and theory – all understandable attempts to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Knowing becomes an excuse, a delay, a salt substitute for that surrender to Love, which is, according to I Corinthians 13, always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes. Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest, writer and Founding Director of the Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico, suggests that we admit that this freedom (the only freedom the gospel promises us) is almost lost in our time, even in our religious communities. Everything must be managed, understood, explained, talked through, worked out, confronted, and exposed (except social injustice.) In such a private, heady and protective world, love has a hard time breaking through. "We understand all the mysteries there are, and know everything, and have faith in all its fullness to move mountains, but are too often without love...is what I Corinth. 13 tells us yet again."

This is not to make an anti-intellectual statement or naively proclaim that love conquers all. However, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, God is specifically encountered in history and relationships, not in analysis. Community and commitments, and the trials thereof, grow people up. Heroism has to do with character, character that showed itself in action and deed. Being with doing teaches us that life is hard, we don't and shouldn't always get our own way and success has many surprising faces.

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Last Sunday, I saw George for the first time in a long time. I had encountered him often outside the coffee shop, hungry, desperate, looking for any spare change he could, and ironically most always cheerful. He got around in a motorized wheel chair, extra weight and poor circulation rendering his legs weak and unable to allow him to walk for any length of time. But last week, he was outside having a cup of coffee, waved as I drove in and bounded over to say hello. He looked great and I told him so. He was exuberant about the job he now held and glad he did not have to be on the street peddling for money anymore. As I drove away I felt a swell of hope rise up in me. Why? Because I realized that in the midst of such troubled times where the idea of love gets stifled by cynicism, hopelessness, despair, or indifference; where communities die amid tons of expertise and pressing issues that we all want to deal with flounder in issues of ego and power - I realized that somehow, some way, George got loved back into life. A community, humanity, reached out to him and he grabbed hold – it seems basic, and non-heroic on some level, perhaps even foolish and insignificant in the wake of news-worthy tragedies confronting us day after day - but it reminded me about something that I sometimes forget now and sometimes forgot as a collegiate coach – sometimes it's important to stick with the basics. I committed small injustices to student-athletes when I failed to remember the basics and was enamored with all the growing knowledge I gained for new techniques and strategies and lost sight of the foundations upon which their honed skills were built. And I do sometimes fear that as a human being, as a priest and a minister of the gospel of Christ I could fail to do the same.

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In this Epiphany season, the point is that God's love is meant to be understood to transcend all boundaries, whose manifestation became human in Christ, who loved and lived as an example of radical goodness, the prophetic face of that love.

While all of us would confess, myself included, that we are not always conspicuously loving people, we have learned something of love somewhere along the way from others. Parents, spouse, partner, friends, colleagues, children, even strangers. In that way the love of God, of Christ might become more real to us. Love must have a face. How could we really understand love if it were not for the love of other human beings? God's love must have a face as it did in Christ, and ought to in us. Love is meant to be embodied, manifested - otherwise, what is the point of all this religious ritual and seeking? It has been said that growing spiritually, one increasingly realizes how utterly dependent one is, on God and on the grace of God that comes through people.

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Love is the essential character of God. To love another is to do what God does. Love is prophetic. We may not be able to end the war today, stop global warming, eliminate poverty or homelessness, resolve years of strife and conflict - but surely there is something, someone we can love back into life, little by little. Perhaps it all sounds a bit foolish.

But I believe it is time, in essence, to reclaim love and its timeless litany in Corinthians - in a truly authentic, passionate, compassionate way. And it must come not from God, but from us.

Bob Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States, writes in his recently released book, *Middle Church*:

“It is not the geniuses on whose shoulders are faith rests. It is the fools, those courageous and prophetic few whose hearts are sufficiently overflowing with God’s love.those...whose hearts are “strangely warmed.”

I agree with Edgar that there is no prayer more powerful than our own works, so I offer this Franciscan blessing as did he at the conclusion of his book:

*May God bless you with discomfort...
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,
So that you may live deep within your heart.*

*May God bless you with anger...
At injustice, oppression and exploitation of people,
So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.*

*May God bless you with tears.
To shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war,
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them
And to turn their pain into joy.*

*And may God bless you with enough foolishness...
To believe that you can make a difference in this world,
So that you can do what others claim cannot be done.*

Amen.

Notes:

Edgar, Bob; *Middle Church: Reclaiming the Moral Values of the Faithful Majority from the Religious Right*; Simon & Schuster, New York, 2006.

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